



THIRD STONE

Annotated Bibliography

Grandmaster Flash

Afrofuturism through the Lens of Grandmaster Flash

The work and career of Grandmaster Flash (born Joseph Saddler) defines the sound of Afrofuturism because he field-tested a vision for sonic advancement and, in doing so, helped define world culture within his lifetime. As a founding figure in the sonic legacy of Afrofuturism, Grandmaster Flash's work demonstrates how Afrofuturist practice depends on seeing the impossible, the improbably, and seemingly the absurd, in order to create a new system for the oppressed to survive, thrive, and prosper in a future we may not see.

In order to imagine Afrofuturism through the lens of Grandmaster Flash, it's important to imagine the climate of the South Bronx in the early 1970s. For nearly a decade, residents, many of them immigrants, were displaced as fires destroyed their homes. Narratives ranged from the community citizens themselves burning down their residences to landlords destroying the building for insurance reparations. In the midst of this apocalyptic backdrop is a burgeoning DJ with a vision to control the dancefloor in a very peculiar way. In short, he noticed that when the solo portion of many dance records played the audience responded passionately. His vision became to control this moment so that the solo breakout session of the record would never stop. If he could control this, he could control the crowd.

To achieve this obscure vision, Flash had to audibly dissect his records to extract the solo breakout session of the drummer and play it back at the exact moment of the count. The system required two turntables, a mixer, and two copies of the same record. Flash conceived torque theory, which used the math and science of the turntable's start speed combined with resistance to determine cue placement. In addition, he developed a wax drawing crayon method. He marked cue points on the record. Taken together these methods established the framework for many of the basics of modern DJing. Later DJs would adapt his methods, utilizing, instead, tape as cue markers. Today, Flash's "merry go round" methodology happens with the click of a button on many digital DJ devices.

Flash's methodology included using a specific type of stylus (turntable needle) capable of pulling a record in reverse while keeping the needle in the groove. Further innovations also include a mode of previewing the record he was cueing, what Flash called the "peek-a-boo" allowed him to hear the music in his ear at the precise cue point before allowing the audience to hear. Combined with his torque theory, he also invented what would later be called the slipmat, a circular piece of slippery cloth or synthetic materials disk jockeys place on the turntable platter instead of the traditional rubber mat. His discovery came through experimenting with various materials.

Flash's knowledge of math (of revolutions per minute), science (testing of various materials), technology (testing various turntables that worked best with his theory), and history (of music history) created a new art form that would decades later become the world's leading multimodal artform. In tandem with this S.T.E.M to S.T.E.A.M phenomena was Flash's mentorship of another pioneer who would soon be known as the originator of "the scratch." Flash mentored DJ "Grandwizard Theodore" who is credited for advancing Flash's "Quick mix theory" into what is called the scratch.

For Flash's musical innovations to work, the audience had to buy into the theoretical experiment. Afrofuturist theory must eventually be field tested. Circa 50 years later these elemental foundations of experimentation have developed into an international art form. Musical technology now includes all of Flash's innovations and learning traditional ways of DJing has become an artform in itself.

Rocking the party is only one aspect of Flash's vision. The innovations and additions to Hip-Hop have created a globally celebrated system of prosperity, world building, sharing of diverse cultures, conflict resolution and more through battling lyrical, musical, artistic skills and knowledge through methods of performance.

Sources

- Katz, Mark. *Groove Music: The Art and Culture of the Hip-Hop DJ*, Oxford University Press, 2012.
- Piskor, Ed. *Hip Hop Family Tree* (Books 1-4 series), Fantagraphics, 2013-2016.
- Rakim. *Sweat the Technique: Revelations on Creativity from the Lyrical Genius*, Harper Collins, 2019.
- Rose, Tricia. *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America*. Wesleyan University Press, 1994.
- Tobak, Vikki. *Contact High: A Visual History of Hip-Hop*. Clarkson Potter, 2018.